OTF/FEO Interaction

Fellow Teachers...Fellow Teachers

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Vol. 24
No. 1
January
1999

> ***"As teachers, we know the impact change has on education, but we also know what the promise of public education could, and should be."***

This special edition of *Interaction* is my first opportunity to write to you directly since becoming the President of OTF. Each of the last four Presidents of OTF has written to you about the challenges we face as teachers as our education system remains under constant attack. I can only echo those words yet again. Our greatest challenge is to defend and improve public education for each and every student entrusted to us.

We are directed by the *Teaching Profession Act* with the objectives of promoting and advancing the cause of education as well as raising the status of the teaching profession. We are also mandated to arouse and increase public interest in educational affairs. In following the direction given to us by law, the OTF Executive and the Board of Governors has approved, in principle, a strategic framework with the goal of building support for excellence in the publicly funded elementary and secondary schools of Ontario. The framework starts now, in the pre-election period, takes us through the election campaign, and carries us forward into the next century. The middle section of this edition of *Interaction* summarizes the framework.

This new year of 1999 provides us with a great opportunity and an immediate focus for our strategic framework. This year will likely be an election year in Ontario. Since the election of the current government, we have witnessed the reduction of over $1 billion in the funding of public education. We have seen the centralization of control over all aspects of education in the hands of a few people at Queen's Park. We have been coping with changes in curriculum, the way schools are governed, the structure of the school day and the school year, with new formats for report cards and all with almost no professional development. As teachers, we know the impact all of this change has on education, but we also know what the promise of public education could, and should be.

The election campaign will focus public attention on issues. We know from polling that education

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will be an issue in that campaign. The underlying issue is the funding cuts and its impact on education. What the general public does not appreciate is that the government's decision to take this money out of education is not based solely on financial considerations. Rather, it marks a political project based on a neo-conservative concept of education. The election campaign will be a time to discuss a different vision of education and what it would take to realize that vision in the schools of Ontario.

When you are reading this, we will have concluded a meeting in Toronto of all the local Affiliate Presidents. Your president will be coming home with more details on the strategy and the actions it will entail. As you can understand, there are some details we do not want to reveal in *Interaction*. I told the Presidents that our election plan, in particular, must utilize our monetary resources wisely and our human resources extensively. I am calling on each one of you to follow the objectives of the Ontario Teachers' Federation – stand up for, "to promote and to advance the cause of public education", "to raise the status of the profession" and by so doing, "arouse and increase public interest in education."

Yours in solidarity,

Networking

Early in the fall, OTF, along with the Ontario Nurses' Association invited a number of organizations to a series of networking meetings to share ideas about the upcoming provincial election. This network is a broad cross section of unions and social activist groups. There have been four meetings of the whole group. The participants have included the OTF Affiliates, the Ontario Federation of Labour, the Centre for Social Justice, the Ontario Centre for Sustainability, the Environmental Voters, the Ontario Nurses' Association, OPSEU, CUPE, the Ontario Liquor Board Employees' Union, United Steelworkers, the Ontario Council of University Faculty Associations, the Building Trades Council, the Pipe Trades Council, and the Canadian Federation of Students (Ontario Division).

There have also been two subgroups which have been meeting on specific topics such as analysis of swing ridings, polling and communications. The group and subgroups will continue meeting throughout the spring and summer.

New Members

With this edition of *Interaction* we welcome a whole new group of members to the Ontario Teachers' Federation. As of March 31, 1998, occasional teachers are members of OTF. It is a natural home – we are all teachers, regardless of how we are employed. We all share a commitment to the education of students and to excellent publicly funded schools.

The goals of the Ontario Teachers' Federation are enshrined in the *Teaching Profession Act*.

The objectives of the Federation are:

(a) to promote and advance the cause of education;
(b) to raise the status of the teaching profession;
(c) to promote and advance the interests of teachers and to secure conditions that will make possible the best professional service;
(d) to arouse and increase public interest in educational affairs;
(e) to co-operate with other teachers' organizations throughout the world having the same or like objects; and
(f) to represent all members of the pension plan established under the *Teachers' Pension Act, 1989* in the administration of the plan and the management of the pension fund.

We welcome our new members wholeheartedly and we look forward to their joining us in our work to achieve our objectives.

welcome !

> "Teachers...are deeply committed to the education of their students..."
> JUSTICE JAMES MACPHERSON

Political Protest of 1997

The memories of the Political Protest of the Fall of 1997 are still fresh for many of us. It was the first time that teachers from elementary and secondary schools, Catholic and public schools, francophone and anglophone schools were on the same picket lines. It was a time when the public support for teachers and for education was growing.

There was a public awareness that the teachers were fighting for a principle – the principle of well-funded excellent public schools. That awareness extended to the courts. In denying the government an injunction to force teachers back to work, Mr. Justice James MacPherson wrote, "Teachers ...are deeply committed to the education of their students." Though the return to work was not as co-ordinated as we would have liked it to be, there were lasting alliances built among teachers from different Affiliates. Teachers across the province continued to work with their colleagues from other panels and other systems with the shared goal of an excellent, publicly funded system of education for Ontario's students.

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STRATEGIC *overview*

Winter 1997-1998

Following the passage of Bill 160 in December 1997, the OTF Board of Governors heard from a panel of political experts who shared their perspectives on what had been accomplished through the Provincial Protest. The panel included Ruth Grier, a former NDP cabinet minister; Hugh Segal, a former advisor to the Bill Davis Government and a well-known Tory; John Ibbitson, a Southam reporter; and Penny Milton, Executive Director of the Canadian Education Association.

> "It was time for the teachers of Ontario to tell the people what we stood for in education..."
> 1998 WINTER BOARD OF GOVERNORS' MEETING PANEL

The message from the panelists was consistent – the Political Protest had been successful. We had raised education to the number one issue on people's minds. Never before had so many people actually read and understood a piece of legislation. Never before had a group of people succeeded in focusing public attention on the flaws in a piece of legislation.

The panel also gave us advice. They told us it was time for the teachers of Ontario to tell the people what we stood for in education, and that we should talk to the parents and other members of the public about a shared vision for our publicly funded education system.

Fall 1998

At the beginning of the current school year, OTF and the Affiliates held a two-day strategy session with elected people and staff.

Prior to the meeting, OTF's pollster had conducted several in-depth focus groups on education issues and developed a comprehensive survey. The initial results of the polling were presented to the strategy meeting. The main recommendations from the pollsters were:

1. The status quo is lethal.
2. Teachers should position themselves as agents of positive change.
3. Teachers should position themselves as stewards of quality and accountability.
4. Classroom teachers are the most credible spokespeople for education.

At the meeting, several strategic directions were considered. It was acknowledged that we needed a strategy in the immediate term to deal with the upcoming election. However, it was also determined that the strategy needed to be nested within a long-term one with similar tactics and objectives. The outcome of the meeting was a challenging assignment for OTF with a dual focus:

1. To build a proposal for dealing with the upcoming election; and
2. To develop a long-term plan to position teachers as agents of positive change in the public education system.

STRATEGIC *overview*

Strategic Framework

The comprehensive strategic framework was presented to the OTF Executive at its October meeting, and to a special meeting of the Board of Governors in November, where it was unanimously approved in principle. The following is a summary of the key points in the document:

'The comprehensive strategic framework was unanimously approved in principle'

Timelines:

- Six to eight months – The Election
- Twelve to 18 months – Beyond the Election
- Five to eight years – The Future

Approaches:

- Defining excellence in education.
- Development of broad community alliances in support of goal.

Assumptions:

(Based on polling)

- Education is high on the list of public concerns.
- Classroom teachers have a high credibility rating with the public.
- There are soft Tory voters whose vote can be swayed on education issues.

Methods:

- Establishing what teachers stand for—what a teacher's vision of excellent, publicly funded elementary and secondary schools in Ontario looks like.

- Sharing that vision with the public.
- Engaging the public and teachers in discussion about a vision for education through several tactics:

  1. Community forums where we will listen and exchange ideas.
  2. Door-to-door canvassing on non-partisan education issues.
  3. Participation on a personal basis in partisan election campaigns.
  4. Public relations campaign regarding a vision of education.

Election of 1999

The initial thrust of the strategy is based on a six-to-eight-month timeline focussed on the next provincial election.

> **"When the shooting war starts, we've got to be rowing in the same direction because that's the only way to beat the unions."**
>
> Leslie Noble, Co-Chair
> Tory Campaign Committee

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The Mike Harris Conservative Government is in the fourth year of its Mandate. A provincial election is expected some time in the late spring of 1999.

STRATEGIC *overview*

In early October 1998, the Ontario PC Party held what is expected to be its final policy convention before the election. It was clear that the intention of the government is to make the ballot question in the next election, "Who is running this province, the government or the labour unions?" In response to a community/labour demonstration outside the convention, Harris was quoted as saying, "I've learned that if people are trying to protest or lie or bring me down through screaming and yelling, it usually means they don't have an idea of their own worth their (sic) salt to sell positively, and I take great comfort from that."

One of the co-chairs of the Tory campaign committee was also quoted as saying, "When the shooting war starts, we've got to be rowing in the same direction because that's the only way we are going to beat the unions, and it's the only way we are going to win the next election."

A leaked government communications strategy document says, in part, "Most Ontarians believe that the government's motive in education reforms is cost cutting. However, research has shown that Ontarians also see the teachers' unions as more interested in money and power than in kid's education. In other words, neither we nor the unions have ownership over 'education quality'."

These comments from the governing Conservative Party reinforce our commitment to the direction and focus of our strategic plan – to regain the education quality agenda for the teaching profession.

> "Teachers have told us they want a strategy that will carry education into the future."

Long Term

The strategic framework acknowledges that the goal is one that must go beyond the next election. We have been talking to teachers across Ontario in focus groups and they have told us they want a strategy that will carry education into the future. They are interested in support for publicly funded education being transformed from an election issue to a fundamental value of Ontario society.

We need a shared, alternative vision of education. This is a challenge and it will take us several years to achieve. We must continue to talk to the people of Ontario about our vision of education. It is equally important that we also listen to Ontarians about their vision for education. We must find our common ground. Without a shared understanding of what excellence in education is, without a shared understanding of the requirements to achieve that excellence, governments, regardless of political stripe, will continue to be able to shape education to their own political agenda.

We must continue to build on our alliances. We will have the opportunity to rethink the relationship between a school, its community, parents, families and the world of work. We must look beyond our usual associations and find our hidden and out of the ordinary allies such as the Learning Partnership, chambers of commerce and service clubs.

The strategic framework proposes that we continue our dialogue with the people of Ontario and work toward a Provincial Summit on Education within the next two or three years. This summit would not be based on a panel of experts, but would rather be a summit of citizens who have been actively engaged in our dialogue process.

STRATEGIC *overview*

While our current energies are focussed on the election activities (see box this page), this strategic framework will carry us forward. It will give us a foundation that would allow us to talk to any governing party about shared values and a clear vision of education. It will build the support for an excellent publicly funded education system in Ontario. It will direct us, and our students to the future.

Election Plan

There are two underpinnings to the election plan. The first is to increase the political involvement and engagement of teachers in the campaign. The second is to build strong support for an excellent publicly funded elementary and secondary education system in Ontario.

As part of this short term election strategy, OTF will co-ordinate several activities with the Affiliates:

- Strengthening alliances with other organizations with a strong commitment or interest in education issues;
- Conducting a series of all-Affiliate political action workshops directed mainly at people who have not before worked in election campaigns;
- A co-ordinated advertising campaign on radio, television and newspapers;
- Training of campaign canvassers for the election;
- Research and polling on election issues;
- Research on individual ridings;
- Preparation and distribution of education fact sheets; and
- Locally based activities..

Teachers in the Community

During the fall of 1998, OTF has been reaching out to the community in many different ways. Two of the most notable activities have been our sponsorship in the Nelson Mandela and the Children event at the Toronto SkyDome in September, and our participation in the first Education Day at the Canadian Aboriginal Festival.

OTF and three of its Affiliates, ETFO, OECTA and OSSTF were sponsors of Nelson Mandela and the Children. President Liz Barkley reported to the October OTF Executive Meeting about the day. The students of Ontario got to hear first hand from Nelson Mandela, who has fought for justice and democracy for most of his life. President Barkley told the Executive, "The students who listened to the inspirational words of Nelson Mandela had an educational experience that will stay with them for the rest of their lives."

President Barkley also represented the teachers of Ontario at the official opening of the Canadian Aboriginal Festival and at the Education Day. For the first time, the Festival held an Education Day for students and their teachers. There were demonstrations of the PowWow, Lacrosse, the Great Peace, traditional healing, teaching and crafts. We are reviewing the evaluation forms from teachers to see how we can make the day even better.

Partners

Every day when we go to work in our schools, teachers rely on a whole set of partners in education – the education workers in our workplaces. Education workers are those people who work beside us – the speech pathologists, the psychologists, the secretaries, the custodians and the teaching assistants, to name just a few. Without these members of the education team, our schools would not function.

In working towards our goal of building support for excellence in our publicly funded elementary and secondary schools, it is essential to involve all members of the school community. Education workers are our first natural allies. Some of our education workers are already part of the family, while not members of OTF, they are represented by some of our Affiliates.

We will be working together with our education worker partners intensively during the next few months as we approach the next provincial election. It is important that we remember to include our colleagues in our long-term strategy. They bring another important perspective to the struggle for public education. We must ensure that education workers are part of our activities for the election campaign and beyond.

Many of our colleagues who are education workers in our schools, are now entering the period of negotiations which teachers were experiencing during the fall. We wish them luck in that undertaking and anticipate their support in the bigger challenge facing education.

Pictured in the photo from L to R: Earl Manners, OSSTF President; President Nelson Mandela; Gracia Machel; Liz Barkley, OTF President, Phyllis Benedict, ETFO President; and Marilies Rettig, Past President of OECTA.

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Hitting the Hustings ...

One of the components of the election plan is for teachers to get involved as volunteers in the campaigns of local candidates. Many teachers have participated as election volunteers in the past, but others have not. OTF and the Affiliates have designed a one-day workshop for those new to campaigns. The workshop focusses on how a political campaign works within a riding. It is designed to give you enough information to raise your comfort level about volunteering for the election campaign.

Agenda

10:00 a.m.	Welcome and overview of the day
10:10	Introductory activity
10:20	Feedback
10:30	Political climate and environment
10:40	Overview of campaign planning and timelines from a riding perspective
11:20	What is the purpose of a campaign? What are the tasks/jobs to be done within a campaign at the riding level?
12:00 p.m.	Brainstorm and report
12:40	Lunch
	A look at specifics: (a) Voter contact (two groups) (b) Small groups on specific tasks generated from discussion in (a)
1:40	Evaluation
	Planning your involvement
2:00	Wrap-Up
	Adjournment

By the time you are reading this *Interaction*, workshops will have been held in North Bay, and Toronto, but there will be nine more in February and March. If you are interested in taking part, please contact your local Affiliate President.

February 13, 1999	• Kitchener-Waterloo • London
February 20, 1999	• Hamilton/St.Catharines • Cornwall
February 27, 1999	• Chatham • Peterborough
March 6, 1999	• Mississauga/Halton • Oshawa
To be announced	• Ottawa

OTF/FEO *Interaction*

Published for professional teachers by the **Ontario Teachers' Federation**

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ISSN 0829-1942

Printed in a union shop